

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 3

0 15 minutes read

Bronwyn

Tuesday, September 25, 8:50 a.m.

I can't stop doing the math in my head. It's eight-fifty a.m. on Tuesday, and twenty-four hours ago Simon was going to homeroom for the last time. Six hours and five minutes from then we were heading to detention. An hour later, he died.

Seventeen years, gone just like that.

I slide down into my chair in the back corner of homeroom, feeling twenty-five heads swivel my way as I sit. Even without About That to provide an update, news of Simon's death was everywhere by dinnertime last night. I got multiple texts from everyone I've ever given my phone number to.

"You all right?" My friend Yumiko reaches over and squeezes my hand. I nod, but the gesture makes the pounding in my head even worse. Turns out half a flask of bourbon on an empty stomach is a terrible idea. Luckily both my parents were still at work when Nate dropped me off, and my sister, Maeve, poured enough black coffee down my throat that I was semicoherent by the time they got home. Any lingering effects they chalked up to trauma.

The first bell rings, but the speaker crackle that usually signals morning announcements never comes. Instead, our homeroom teacher, Mrs. Park, clears her throat and gets up from behind her desk. She's clutching a sheet of paper that trembles in her hand as she starts to read. "The following is an official announcement from Bayview High's administration. I'm so sorry to have to share this terrible news. Yesterday afternoon one of your classmates, Simon Kelleher, suffered a massive allergic reaction. Medical help was called immediately and arrived quickly, but unfortunately, it was too late to help Simon. He died at the hospital shortly after arrival."

A low whispering buzz runs through the room as somebody chokes out a sob. Half the class already has their phones out. Rules be damned today, I guess. Before I can stop myself, I pull my phone from my backpack and swipe to About That. I half expect a notification for the juicy new update Simon bragged about before detention yesterday, but of course there's nothing except last week's news.

Our favorite stoner drummer's trying his hand at film. RC's installed a camera in the light fixture in his bedroom, and he's been holding premieres for all his friends. You've been warned, girls. (Too late for KL, though.)

Everyone's seen the flirting between manic pixie dream girl TC and new rich boy GR, but who knew it might be something more? Apparently not her boyfriend, who sat

oblivious in the bleachers at Saturday's game while T&G got hot and heavy right underneath him. Sorry, JD. Always the last to know.

The thing with About That was ... you could pretty much guarantee every word was true. Simon built it sophomore year, after he spent spring break at some expensive coding camp in Silicon Valley, and nobody except him was allowed to post there. He had sources all over school, and he was choosy and careful about what he reported. People usually denied it or ignored it, but he was never wrong.

I'd never been featured; I'm too squeaky-clean for that. There's only one thing Simon might have written about me, but it would have been almost impossible for him to find out.

Now I guess he never will.

Mrs. Park is still talking. "There will be grief counseling provided in the auditorium all day. You may leave class any time you feel the need to speak with someone about this tragedy. The school is planning a memorial service for Simon after Saturday's football game, and we'll provide those details as soon as they're available. We'll also be sure to keep you up to date on his family's arrangements once we know them."

The bell rings and we all get up to leave, but Mrs. Park calls my name before I've even collected my backpack. "Bronwyn, can you hold back a moment?"

Yumiko shoots me a sympathetic look as she stands, tucking a strand of her choppy black hair behind her ear. "Kate and I'll wait for you in the hallway, okay?"

I nod and grab my bag. Mrs. Park is still dangling the announcement from one hand as I approach her desk. "Bronwyn, Principal Gupta wants all of you who were in the room with Simon to receive one-on-one counseling today. She's asked me to let you know that you're scheduled for eleven o'clock in Mr. O'Farrell's office."

Mr. O'Farrell is my guidance counselor, and I'm very familiar with his office. I've spent a lot of time there over the past six months, strategizing college admissions. "Is Mr. O'Farrell doing the counseling?" I ask. I guess that wouldn't be so bad.

Mrs. Park's forehead creases. "Oh, no. The school's bringing in a professional."

Great. I'd spent half the night trying to convince my parents I didn't need to see anybody. They'll be thrilled it was forced on me anyway. "Okay," I say, and wait in case she has anything else to tell me, but she just pats my arm awkwardly.

As promised, Kate and Yumiko are hovering outside the door. They flank me as we walk to first-period calculus, like they're shielding me from intrusive paparazzi. Yumiko steps aside, though, when she sees Evan Neiman waiting outside our classroom door.

“Bronwyn, hey.” Evan’s wearing one of his usual monogrammed polo shirts with ewn embroidered in script above his heart. I’ve always wondered what the W stands for. Walter? Wendell? William? I hope for his sake it’s William. “Did you get my text last night?”

I did. Need anything? Want some company? Since that’s the only time Evan Neiman has ever texted me, my cynical side decided he was angling for a front-row seat to the most shocking thing that’s ever happened at Bayview. “I did, thanks. I was really tired, though.”

“Well, if you ever feel like talking, let me know.” Evan glances around the emptying hallway. He’s a stickler for punctuality. “We should probably get inside, huh?”

Yumiko grins at me as we take our seats and whispers, “Evan kept asking where you were at Mathlete practice yesterday.”

I wish I could match her enthusiasm, but at some point between detention and calculus I lost all interest in Evan Neiman. Maybe it’s posttraumatic stress from the Simon situation, but right now I can’t remember what attracted me in the first place. Not that I was ever head over heels. Mostly I thought Evan and I had potential to be a solid couple until graduation, at which point we’d break up amicably and head to our different colleges. Which I realize is pretty uninspiring, but so is high school dating. For me, anyway.

I sit through calculus, my mind far, far away from math, and then suddenly it’s over and I’m walking to AP English with Kate and Yumiko. My head’s still so full of what happened yesterday that when we pass Nate in the hallway it seems perfectly natural to call out, “Hi, Nate.” I stop, surprising us both, and he does too.

“Hey,” he replies. His dark hair is more disheveled than ever, and I’m pretty sure he’s wearing the same T-shirt as yesterday. Somehow, though, it works on him. A little too well. Everything from his tall, rangy build to his angular cheekbones and wide-set, dark-fringed eyes is making me lose my train of thought.

Kate and Yumiko are staring at him too, but in a different way. More like he’s an unpredictable zoo animal in a flimsy cage. Hallway conversations with Nate Macauley aren’t exactly part of our routine. “Have you had your counseling session yet?” I ask.

His face is a total blank. “My what?”

“Grief counseling. Because of Simon. Didn’t your homeroom teacher tell you?”

“I just got here,” he says, and my eyes widen. I never expected Nate to win any attendance awards, but it’s almost ten o’clock.

“Oh. Well, all of us who were there are supposed to have one-on-one sessions. Mine’s at eleven.”

“Jesus Christ,” Nate mutters, raking a hand through his hair.

The gesture pulls my eyes to his arm, where they remain until Kate clears her throat. My face heats as I snap back to attention, too late to register whatever she said. “Anyway. See you around,” I mumble.

Yumiko bends her head toward mine as soon as we’re out of earshot. “He looks like he just rolled out of bed,” she whispers. “And not alone.”

“I hope you doused yourself in Lysol after getting off his motorcycle,” Kate adds. “He’s a total man-wh0re.”

I glare at her. “You realize it’s se*xist to say man-wh0re, right? If you have to use the term you should at least be gender-neutral about it.”

“Whatever,” Kate says dismissively. “Point is, he’s a walking STD.”

I don’t answer. That’s Nate’s reputation, sure, but we don’t really know anything about him. I almost tell her how carefully he drove me home yesterday, except I’m not sure what point I’d be trying to make.

After English I head for Mr. O’Farrell’s office, and he waves me inside when I knock on his open door. “Have a seat, Bronwyn. Dr. Resnick is running a little late, but she’ll be here shortly.” I sit down across from him and spy my name scrawled across the manila folder placed neatly in the middle of his desk. I move to pick it up, then hesitate, not sure if it’s confidential, but he pushes it toward me. “Your recommendation from the Model UN organizer. In plenty of time for Yale’s early-action deadline.”

I exhale, letting out a small sigh of relief. “Oh, thanks!” I say, and pick up the folder. It’s the last one I’ve been waiting for. Yale’s a family tradition—my grandfather was a visiting scholar there and moved his whole family from Colombia to New Haven when he got tenure. All his kids, including my dad, went to undergrad there, and it’s where my parents met. They always say our family wouldn’t exist if it weren’t for Yale.

“You’re very welcome.” Mr. O’Farrell leans back and adjusts his glasses. “Were your ears burning earlier? Mr. Camino stopped by to ask if you’d be interested in tutoring for chemistry this semester. A bunch of bright juniors are struggling the way you did last year. They’d love to learn strategies from someone who ended up acing the course.”

I have to swallow a couple of times before I can answer. “I would,” I say, as brightly as I can manage, “but I might be overcommitted already.” My smile stretches too tightly over my teeth.

“No worries. You have a lot on your plate.”

Chemistry was the only class I'd ever struggled with, so much so that I had a D average at midterm. With every quiz I bombed, I could feel the Ivy League slipping out of reach. Even Mr. O'Farrell started gently suggesting that any top-tier school would do.

So I brought my grades up, and got an A by the end of the year. But I'm pretty sure nobody wants me sharing my strategies with the other students.

Cooper

Thursday, September 27, 12:45 p.m.

“Will I see you tonight?”

Keely takes my hand as we walk to our lockers after lunch, looking up at me with huge dark eyes. Her mom is Swedish and her dad's Filipino, and the combination makes Keely the most beautiful girl in school by a lot. I haven't seen her much this week between baseball and family stuff, and I can tell she's getting antsy. Keely's not a clinger, exactly, but she needs regular couple time.

“Not sure,” I say. “I'm pretty behind on homework.”

Her perfect lips curve down and I can tell she's about to protest when a voice floats over the loudspeaker. “Attention, please. Would Cooper Clay, Nate Macauley, Adelaide Prentiss, and Bronwyn Rojas please report to the main office. Cooper Clay, Nate Macauley, Adelaide Prentiss, and Bronwyn Rojas to the main office.”

Keely looks around like she's expecting an explanation. “What's that about? Something to do with Simon?”

“I guess.” I shrug. I already answered questions from Principal Gupta a couple of days ago about what happened during detention, but maybe she's gearing up for another round. My father says Simon's parents are pretty connected around town, and the school should be worried about a lawsuit if it turns out they were negligent in any way. “Better go. I'll talk to you later, okay?” I give Keely a quick kiss on the cheek, shoulder my backpack, and head down the hall.

When I get to the principal's office, the receptionist points me toward a small conference room that's already crowded with people: Principal Gupta, Addy, Bronwyn, Nate, and a police officer. My throat gets a little dry as I take the last empty chair.

“Cooper, good. Now we can get started.” Principal Gupta folds her hands in front of her and looks around the table. “I'd like to introduce Officer Hank Budapest with the Bayview Police Department. He has some questions about what you witnessed on Monday.”

Officer Budapest shakes each of our hands in turn. He's young but already balding, with sandy hair and freckles. Not very intimidating, authority-wise. "Nice to meet you all. This shouldn't take long, but after speaking with the Kelleher family we want to take a closer look at Simon's death. Autopsy results came back this morning, and—"

"Already?" Bronwyn interrupts, earning a look from Principal Gupta that she doesn't notice. "Don't those usually take longer?"

"Preliminary results can be available within a couple days," Officer Budapest says. "These were fairly conclusive, showing that Simon died from a large dose of peanut oil ingested shortly before death. Which his parents found strange, considering how careful he always was with his food and drink. All of you told Principal Gupta that Simon drank a cup of water just before he collapsed, is that right?"

We all nod, and Officer Budapest continues, "The cup contained traces of peanut oil, so it seems clear Simon died from that drink. What we're trying to figure out now is how peanut oil could have gotten into his cup."

Nobody speaks. Addy meets my eyes and then cuts hers away, a small frown creasing her forehead. "Does anyone remember where Simon got the cup from?" Officer Budapest prompts, poising his pen over a blank notebook in front of him.

"I wasn't paying attention," Bronwyn says. "I was writing my assignment."

"Me too," Addy says, although I could've sworn she hadn't even started. Nate stretches and stares at the ceiling.

"I remember," I volunteer. "He got the cup from a stack next to the sink."

"Was the stack upside down, or right-side up?"

"Upside down," I say. "Simon pulled the top one off."

"Did you notice any liquid leave the cup when he did that? Did he shake it?"

I think back. "No. He just filled it with water."

"And then he drank it?"

"Yeah," I say, but Bronwyn corrects me.

"No," she says. "Not right away. He talked for a while. Remember?" She turns to Nate. "He asked you if you put the cell phones in our backpacks. The ones that got us in trouble with Mr. Avery."

“The cell phones. Right.” Officer Budapest scratches something down in his notebook. He doesn’t say it like a question, but Bronwyn explains anyway.

“Somebody played a prank on us,” she says. “It’s why we were in detention. Mr. Avery found phones in our backpacks that didn’t belong to us.” She turns to Principal Gupta with an injured expression. “It really wasn’t fair. I’ve been meaning to ask, is that something that goes on your permanent record?”

Nate rolls his eyes. “It wasn’t me. Someone stuck a phone in my backpack too.”

Principal Gupta furrows her brow. “This is the first I’m hearing about this.”

I shrug when she meets my eyes. Those phones were the last thing on my mind these past few days.

Officer Budapest doesn’t look surprised. “Mr. Avery mentioned that when I met with him earlier. He said none of the kids ever claimed the phones, so he thought it must’ve been a prank after all.” He slides his pen between his index and middle finger and taps it rhythmically against the table. “Is that the sort of joke Simon might have played on you all?”

“I don’t see why,” Addy says. “There was a phone in his backpack too. Besides, I barely knew him.”

“You were on junior prom court with him,” Bronwyn points out. Addy blinks, like she’s only just remembering that’s true.

“Any of you kids ever have trouble with Simon?” Officer Budapest asks. “I’ve heard about the app he made—About That, right?” He’s looking at me, so I nod. “You guys ever been on it?”

Everyone shakes their head except Nate. “Lots of times,” he says.

“What for?” Officer Budapest asks.

Nate smirks. “Stupid sh!t—” he starts, but Principal Gupta cuts him off.

“Language, Mr. Macauley.”

“Stupid stuff,” Nate amends. “Hooking up, mostly.”

“Did that bother you? Being gossiped about?”

“Not really.” He looks like he means it. I guess being on a gossip app isn’t a big deal compared to getting arrested. If that’s true. Simon never posted it, so nobody seems to know exactly what Nate’s deal is.

Kinda pathetic, how Simon was our most trusted news source.

Officer Budapest looks at the rest of us. “But not you three?” We all shake our heads again. “Did you ever worry about ending up on Simon’s app? Feel like you had something hanging over your heads, or anything like that?”

“Not me,” I say, but my voice isn’t as confident as I would have liked. I glance away from Officer Budapest and catch Addy and Bronwyn looking like polar opposites: Addy’s gone pale as a ghost, and Bronwyn’s flushed brick red. Nate watches them for a few seconds, tilts his chair back, and looks at Officer Budapest.

“Everybody’s got secrets,” he says. “Right?”

My workout routine goes long that night, but my dad makes everyone wait till I’m done so we can eat dinner together. My brother, Lucas, clutches his stomach and staggers to the table with a long-suffering look when we finally sit down at seven.

The topic of conversation’s the same as it’s been all week: Simon. “You had to figure the police’d get involved at some point,” Pop says, spooning a small mountain of mashed potatoes onto his plate. “Something’s not right about how that boy died.” He snorts. “Peanut oil in the water system, maybe? Lawyers are gonna have a field day with that.”

“Were his eyes bugging out of his head like this?” asks Lucas, making a face. He’s twelve, and Simon’s death is nothing but video-game gore to him.

My grandmother reaches over and swats Lucas on the back of his hand. Nonny’s barely five feet tall with a head full of tight white curls, but she means business. “Hush your mouth unless you can speak of that poor young man with respect.”

Nonny’s lived with us since we moved here from Mississippi five years ago. It surprised me then that she came along; our grandfather had been dead for years, but she had plenty of friends and clubs that kept her busy. Now that we’ve lived here for a while, I get it. Our basic colonial costs three times what our house in Mississippi did, and there’s no way we could afford it without Nonny’s money. But you can play baseball year-round in Bayview, and it’s got one of the best high school programs in the country. At some point, Pop expects I’ll make this gigantic mortgage and the job he hates worthwhile.

I might. After my fastball improved by five miles an hour over the summer, I ended up fourth on ESPN’s predictions for the June MLB draft next year. I’m getting scouted by a lot of colleges too, and wouldn’t mind heading there first. But baseball’s not the same as football or basketball. If a guy can head for the minors right out of high school, he usually does.

Pop points at me with his knife. “You got a showcase game Saturday. Don’t forget.”

As if I could. The schedule's posted around the whole house.

"Kevin, maybe one weekend off?" my mother murmurs, but her heart's not in it. She knows it's a losing battle.

"Best thing Cooperstown can do is business as usual," Pop says. "Slacking off won't bring that boy back. God rest his soul."

Nonny's small, bright eyes settle on me. "I hope you realize none of you kids could've done anything for Simon, Cooper. The police have to dot their i's and cross their t's, that's all."

I don't know about that. Officer Budapest kept asking me about the missing EpiPens and how long I was by myself in the nurse's office. Almost like he thought I might've done something with them before Ms. Grayson got there. But he didn't come out and say it. If he thinks someone messed with Simon, I'm not sure why he isn't looking at Nate. If anybody asked me—which they didn't—I'd wonder how a guy like Nate even knew about EpiPens in the first place.

We've just finished clearing the table when the doorbell rings, and Lucas sprints for the door, hollering, "I'll get it!" A few seconds later he yells again. "It's Keely!"

Nonny rises to her feet with difficulty, using the skull-topped cane Lucas picked out last year when she faced up to the fact that she couldn't walk on her own anymore. "Thought you said you two didn't have plans tonight, Cooper."

"We didn't," I mutter as Keely enters the kitchen with a smile, wrapping her arms around my neck in a tight hug.

"How are you?" she murmurs in my ear, her soft lips brushing my cheek. "I've been thinking about you all day."

"Okay," I say. She pulls back and reaches into her pocket, briefly flashing a cellophane packet and a smile. Red Vines, which are definitely not part of my nutritional regimen, but my favorite candy in the world. The girl gets me. And my parents, who require a few minutes of polite conversation before they head out for their bowling league.

My phone chimes, and I pull it out of my pocket. Hey, handsome.

I duck my head to hide the grin that's suddenly tugging at my mouth, and text back: Hey.

Can I see you tonight?

Bad time. Call you later?

OK miss you.

Keely's talking to my mother, her eyes bright with interest. She's not faking it. Keely isn't only beautiful; she's what Nonny calls "sugar all the way through." A genuinely sweet girl. Every guy at Bayview wishes he were me.

Miss you too.